

# Dancing like a maenad in the twentieth century

Fiona Macintosh

Well into the 1950s, it was very common for girls' schools to offer classes in 'Greek dance' on the curriculum. Even to this day, local ballet schools sometimes offer, besides ballet, tap, and jazz, a class called 'Classical Greek Dance'. Here Fiona Macintosh explores the ongoing importance of one of the most essential elements of any Greek dramatic production in the very different context of twentieth-century Britain. She argues that, far from being remote from modern life, the figures involved in developing British Greek dance were colourful characters involved in high-level public scandal; furthermore, that the whole venture became politically charged, sometimes running dangerously close to Nazi ideals.

## Modern dance, ancient inspiration: the revival of the Greek play

The pioneers of Modern Dance at the beginning of the twentieth century, notably Isadora Duncan (below) and Maud Allan (below), turned naturally to the Greeks for inspiration. But their performances in private salons or in public – both slightly morally ambivalent venues – were not the only opportunities for dancing like a maenad at that time. There was also the route of performing in revivals of ancient plays, which was exemplified and led by Ruby Ginner (the third of the Three Graces below), the founding 'mother' of 'Classical Greek Dance'. Ginner wrote a number of rather dated books on Greek dance (including *The Revived Greek Dance* (1933) and *Gateway to the Dance* (1960)), but in fact 'Classical Greek Dance' became enmeshed in some of the most urgent political questions of the day.

The revival of Greek drama in the professional theatre from the 1880s onwards was intimately connected to changes within classical scholarship (the widening of the classical curriculum generally and the institutionalization of archaeology in particular), as well as to the broadening of the student population with the creation of new institutions for women (Girton College, Cambridge, and Somerville College, Oxford, were amongst the first to stage Greek plays).

Early revivals in Oxford, Cambridge, and London during the 1880s boasted remarkably static choruses, but by the

early part of the new century the possibility of a singing/dancing chorus in performance attracted much attention amongst performers and audiences alike. Many productions expended much time and energy on getting the chorus right, but this was never quite achieved until Reinhardt's production of *Oedipus Rex* at Covent Garden in 1912.

## Embracing the eternal problem – what to do with the chorus?

In contrast to both Duncan and Allan, the Greek dancer for Ginner was by definition a member of a chorus: the collective rather than the solo performer was her preferred model. Ginner began her professional theatrical career in the company of Frank Benson, who had played Clytemnestra in the very first Oxford Greek play, *Agamemnon*, in 1880. Ginner's own introduction to Greek dance came through her training as a member of the chorus in *Alkestis* (1902) and *Antigone* (1904) at Crystal Palace.

Ginner formed a school with a mime specialist, Irene Mawer, in 1915, and three years later the Ginner–Mawer School inaugurated its annual Summer School. It was here that work on the Greek chorus was explored and developed for numerous professional productions of Euripides' tragedies. During the Summer School in 1919, for example, the choruses for Lewis Casson and Bruce Winston's highly successful and harrowingly topical

production of *The Trojan Women* were developed. With Sybil Thorndike in the part of *Hecuba*, a role she was to take up many times subsequently, *The Trojan Women* premiered at the Holborn Empire in December 1919, with choruses led and choreographed by Irene Mawer. The Ginner–Mawer School won the highest acclaim, described as 'the true spirit of the Greek school' and the students were invited to perform at the second Delphic Festival in Greece in 1930.

## Sex, scandal, and cleaning up the act

In the period after World War I, anyone involved in Greek Dance had to distance themselves from the morally tarnished reputation of one of its leading pre-war exponents. During the war itself, in 1918, Maud Allan had gone to court in order to defend her reputation after being accused of sexual impropriety. She had a very wide following, especially amongst women; and rumours had circulated about a *ménage à trois* between her and the Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, and his wife, or more frequently, of her lesbian affair with Margot Asquith. Furthermore, she was perceived to be undermining the war effort through both her dancing and her lifestyle. Allan lost her case and her reputation, and in turn she tarnished the image of the Greek dancer in the inter-war period.

There were various ways in which the Ginner–Mawer School strove to clean up the image of Greek dance in the wake of Allan's trial. In 1924 the Association of Teachers of Greek Dance introduced exams to standardize practice within this relatively new area of dance. Not only did the curriculum include dance, it involved the study of the visual arts, literature, and myth as well. 'Ladies' Greek' in the Victorian period had meant Greek without accents and the need to struggle with a parallel translation. In many ways, the 'Ladies' Greek' of the early twentieth century became 'The Revived Greek Dance' (as 'Classical Greek Dance' was known in the early years), in which dance classes and Greek civilization were now afforded to the sisters of those young men

who learned the classical languages at school. The pupils at the Ginner–Mawer School were being offered genuine insights into what was formerly forbidden territory. Although Greek Dance was always more ‘respectable’ than other kinds of dance for young ladies, it increasingly widened its social base through the Ginner–Mawer School.

### **Dancing to fitness; dancing to ‘perfection’**

In addition to providing a rounded education, ‘The Revived Greek Dance’ also acquired respectability through its supposed health-promoting qualities. The Greeks were deemed the best guides in the promotion of healthy living because their early training in physical education and dance was said to have developed their ideal physiques. Greek Dance was seen, even by doctors, as a way to counteract ‘the general restlessness, exaggeration and neurosis of the world today’. Ginner claimed in 1922 in a lecture in Leamington that Greek Dance led to a ‘healthy and beautiful physique, to a perfectly controlled expression of mind and soul’, which the modern world with its ‘rush and hurry’, ‘too much mechanism’, and ‘loss of mental and physical control’ denies. In a world in which ‘jerk and loss of rhythm’ has become the norm, there is a consequent ‘loss of healthy vitality and joy’.

‘The Revived Greek Dance’ was developed against the backdrop of the theory of eugenics during the 1920s and this is very clear in Ginner’s study, where she praises Greek Dance for being the perfect ‘admixture’ of two racial groups: one the indigenous Pelasgians, ‘a short, dark-haired race, with all the passionate, superstitious, imaginative, and artistic qualities of the Southerner’; the other from the North, ‘fair-haired, tall and warlike, with the stern repression of passion peculiar to the Northerner’, one sub-group of which, the Achaeans, were ‘blue-eyed... of a magnificent physique... brave, chaste, self-controlled and law-abiding’. Not only does this sound remarkably similar to contemporary racial theory (the ‘Southerners’ sounding identical to widely held stereotypes of the so-called ‘Jewish character’, and the Northerners becoming synonymous with the Aryan ideal of Nazi ideology), it also draws much of its detail from Ginner and her colleagues’ interpretation of tragedy.

### **From the Greek chorus to the whole-some hockey pitch**

Greek Dance was the ‘most beautiful, the sanest type of movement’, Ginner insisted, and a necessary antidote to ‘the neurotic movements that monopolise

theatres and ballroom dances to the hideous and nerve-tearing din of jazz bands’. Jazz with its roots in Black American culture is deemed primitive and exotic – a kind of drug which caught the war-torn western world when it was at its most vulnerable and which induces ‘imbecilic’ movement and often promotes immorality. If Allan had made Greek dance appear perilously cosmopolitan (for which read German and/or Jewish), it was essential in the post-War period that it be aligned with ‘healthy’ Anglo-Saxon culture. In the 1920s Greek dance is regularly invoked as a model for the embryonic British Dance movement on account of its open-air and athletic character. The Greeks and the British routinely become one in their alleged shared love of games and the great outdoors; and the Greeks’ athletic dances are appropriated readily and effortlessly, we are told, by the English-speaking peoples of the twentieth century.

Ginner had been a political radical in the pre-war days in her involvement with the suffrage movement, but like many of her generation in Britain she had become enthralled by a particular strand of German classical scholarship, which was inextricably linked to spurious scientific racial theories that were to legitimize the extermination of the Jews and other minorities in Europe over the next few years. In 1936 during the Berlin Olympics a production of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* staged the trial between Apollo and the Furies in the final play of the trilogy as the victory of the Aryans over the *Untermenschen*. Ginner’s idealized, physically perfect dancing Greek, who lived in harmony with nature, was dangerously close to the Aryan ideal of Nazi ideology.

*Fiona Macintosh is Fellow of St Hilda's College, Oxford and Director of the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, which kindly provided pictures used to illustrate both this article and Edith Hall's article on Medea in this issue of Omnibus, and the article on Aristophanic comedy in Omnibus 60.*